

## Oklahoma's biotech industry touted at national conference

**By Jim Stafford, Business Writer Jim Stafford: 475-3310, [jstafford@oklahoman.com](mailto:jstafford@oklahoman.com)**

PHILADELPHIA — U.S. Rep. Ernest Istook began a factfinding safari through the maze of exhibition booths at the BIO 2005 conference Monday morning and walked only a few feet before spotting a networking opportunity.

The Warr Acres Republican seized the opportunity to pitch Oklahoma to a BIO industry official who crossed his path. It was a natural. Scott Whitaker, chief operating officer of the Biotechnology Industry Organization, was once an aide to former Sen. Don Nickles.

Istook explained. He is working to arrange a visit to Oklahoma by BIO president Jim Greenwood, and Whitaker "is another good contact for us," he said.

That's how things are done at the 13th annual BIO convention. Chance meetings become opportunities to sell Oklahoma and expand its role as a biotechnology hub whenever a convention participant wanders into exhibition space staffed by dozens of Oklahomans.

Istook said he has long supported expansion of medical research and related facilities in Oklahoma. The state has reached a "critical mass" that it can continue to build upon, he said.

"Sometimes people ask, 'What do we need to do?' " Istook said. "Many times the answer is, 'Don't stop doing what you are already doing.' There are many good things happening, many good trends, and it would be a mistake to focus all your energy on adding new things rather than reinforcing and strengthening what you already are doing."

At a Sunday reception during which he spoke with BIO's Greenwood, Istook said he made it a point to highlight the growth of Oklahoma's biotechnology industry.

"This is the point I made to him: We're not the largest biotech community, but we are one of the fastest growing," he said. "The last time I saw something measuring those numbers, we were in the top 10 in growth rate. I'm talking about Oklahoma City. That's extremely significant."

Oklahoma's effort at selling itself to the biotechnology world were bolstered this year by the presence of both Istook and Oklahoma City Mayor Mick Cornett, who also strolled the exhibition hall Monday morning.

Cornett echoed Istook's "keep-on-keeping-on" theme.

"It's so much easier to expand on what you have, rather than start from nothing," he said. "Scientists and doctors want to be where other great scientists and doctors are, and it's not a stretch to assume we can expand greatly on what we've already accumulated."

As he walked the floor and introduced himself to exhibitors from other states and nations, Cornett said he began to realize exactly whom Oklahoma is competing against for biotechnology jobs and dollars: the world.

"It's kind of amazing that we are competing against Singapore," he said. "And I was talking to some people from India over there, as well as Houston and the state of Kansas and New

England. When we are competing against Singapore for business, that's a small world."

Oklahoma's growing presence in the biotech industry catches many people by surprise, Cornett said.

"It's absolutely a good idea that we have such a large presence here (at the convention)," he said. "In this place, you kind of are as big as your exhibit, because that's what you are selling, your presence."



**BY JIM STAFFORD, THE OKLAHOMAN** The Oklahoma booth highlights the state at the BIO 2005 convention Monday in Philadelphia.



**BY JIM STAFFORD , THE OKLAHOMAN** U.S. Rep. Ernest Istook, R-Warr Acres, talks with an unidentified person Monday at the Oklahoma booth at the BIO 2005 convention.